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“He is a perfect nature-being – and a perfect Viennese!”. Von Wright and Wittgenstein in Cambridge 1939.

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Abstract

As one of Wittgenstein's three heirs and literary executors, the Finnish philosopher Georg Henrik von Wright has had an enormous influence on the posthumous publishing of the Wittgenstein literary estate. His relationship to Wittgenstein's philosophy was, however, somewhat paradoxical. Never doubting that Wittgenstein was a philosophical genius, von Wright was still the person close to Wittgenstein who kept the greatest intellectual distance. The paper gives an account of von Wright's first encounter with Wittgenstein at Cambridge during 1939. It is based on von Wright's autobiographical writings and the letters he wrote to his professor Eino Kaila in Finland, including also some references to Cora Diamond's edition of Wittgenstein's lectures on the foundations of mathematics, which von Wright attended during the Easter term. It is argued that von Wright initially wasn't completely convinced by Wittgenstein, but finally became totally overwhelmed. In his change of attitude, seeming externalities like Wittgenstein's whistling skills played a surprising part.

At the end of February 1939, a 22-year-old postgraduate student from Finland arrived at Cambridge to work on his thesis on inductive logic. The young man was Georg Henrik von Wright, who in 1948 would become Wittgenstein's successor as professor of philosophy at Cambridge and three years later, one of Wittgenstein's three heirs and literary executors. However, Cambridge would not normally have been von Wright's first choice. He wanted to go to Vienna, but after the *Anschluss*, the city had become a “philosophical desert” (von Wright 2003, 82). Cambridge was chosen mainly for its tradition of research in inductive logic, at the time represented by scholars like C.D. Broad, R.B. Braithwaite and J.M. Keynes. Although von Wright had studied Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* under the guidance of Eino Kaila in Helsinki, he was not even aware of the fact that Wittgenstein was at Cambridge after his return to philosophy. (Von Wright 1989, 10).

Von Wright's first but rather unfortunate meeting with Wittgenstein took place on 6 March 1939 when von Wright attended a lecture towards the end of Wittgenstein's ongoing Lent term lecture series on the foundations of mathematics. This is how he would later tell the story:

My first encounter with Wittgenstein was rather dramatic. I went to his lecture in a room in King's College, introduced myself when he entered, and said that I had the chairman's permission to attend lectures in the faculty. Wittgenstein muttered something in reply which I did not understand, and I seated myself among the audience. He started to lecture and I became at once deeply fascinated – "The strongest impression any man ever made on me", I wrote in my diary that same day – and the statement remains true. At the end of the lecture, however, Wittgenstein expressed his great annoyance at the presence of 'visitors' in his class. He seemed furious. Then he left the room without waiting for an apology or explanation. I was hurt and shocked. (Von Wright 1989, 10).

Wittgenstein's irritation with the "visitors" (of whom there were actually two at the occasion) may also be reflected in the words with which he concluded the session according to Cora Diamond's edition of Wittgenstein lectures during the Lent and Easter terms of 1939: "Today I did not at all get to the place I wanted to get to" (Diamond 1976, 130). But the story continues quite nicely, according to von Wright's autobiography (Von Wright 2001, 76-77). The young man sent Wittgenstein a note and got a reply in which Wittgenstein explained why he had been so upset. "I know that it is quite impossible for any one coming in in the middle, or at *the end*, of the term to get an idea of what we really are driving at", he explained (McGuinness 2008, letter 248). Von Wright was also invited to have a cup of tea the next day, 10 March. The meeting proceeded with a discussion about architecture and Norway. Most importantly, von Wright was kindly encouraged to follow the continuation of Wittgenstein's lectures during the Easter term. So, we have a story about an unfortunate first encounter, which was resolved almost immediately by a meeting, marking the beginning of one of the most important friendships in 20th century philosophy. But was it like this? The letters von Wright wrote to his professor Eino Kaila in Finland during the Spring of 1939 tells a somewhat different and more nuanced story.

To begin with, in the letters to Kaila, the dramatic events at the first encounter with Wittgenstein are not even mentioned. In his letter to Kaila from 5 April, von Wright only writes that he now has met Wittgenstein twice, one of which must have been the meeting at the lecture on 6 March and the other when von Wright and Wittgenstein had the cup of tea together. As a possible trace of the unpleasant first encounter we may perhaps still see von Wright's remark that

Wittgenstein had been “surprisingly friendly”. Von Wright goes on to describing Wittgenstein as “the most extraordinary person in the world”, who lives “inside a shop in the shabbiest poor neighbourhoods of the city – obviously referring to the room above the grocer’s shop at 81 East Road, where Wittgenstein was living at the time with Francis Skinner. What he doesn’t tell Kaila is that he had been there himself for a cup of tea only a few weeks earlier (Monk 1991, 402; von Wright 2003, 83). Von Wright also complains about how extremely difficult it is to discuss with Wittgenstein, since he is “completely ignorant of every philosophical teaching but his own”.

During the Lent and Easter terms of 1939, Wittgenstein lectured on the philosophy of mathematics on Mondays and Wednesdays starting at 5 pm and continuing for at least two hours. The lectures were held in Yorick Smythies’s rooms in King’s College. The regular participants were Norman Malcolm, Douglas Gasking, R.G. Bosanquet, Casimir Lewy, Marya Lutman-Kokoszynska, Rush Rhees, Smythies, Alan Turing, Alister Watson, John Wisdom and von Wright. Occasional other participants were Theodor Redpath, Derek Prince and M.A. Cunningham (Klagge and Nordmann 2003, 350). The lectures of the Easter term started on Monday 24 April 1939 and consisted of 14 meetings, probably ending on 7 June. Von Wright made several attempts to participate in the discussion. In Diamond’s edition, four utterances by von Wright have been recorded, starting with two remarks during the first lecture. The first comes in the context of Wittgenstein’s discussion of the difficulties connected with interpreting an order containing a contradiction, such as “Get out of this room and don’t get out of this room”. “One might ask for rules according to which one was to obey it”, von Wright remarks. Still, von Wright is confused by the proceedings. “It does not really seem right to speak of the whole thing as lectures”, he writes to Kaila on 25 April, the day after the first lecture. For Wittgenstein is “constantly directing questions to the audience” and one is also allowed to “interrupt him and advance suggestions of one’s own”! Such dialogical features must, indeed, have seemed strange to von Wright, who had heard Eino Kaila’s legendary lectures in Helsinki, which were equally unscripted, but had the form of a monologue *in front* of the audience. Perhaps instead we should call Wittgenstein’s lectures “teaching in the art of philosophising” he suggests to Kaila, (quite accurately it seems), adding that he doesn’t doubt that Wittgenstein is a good teacher.

After attending three more lectures, von Wright is growing more impatient. During these, Wittgenstein had continued his discussion of contradictions, claiming, among other things, that “a contradiction is not a germ which shows general illness” – which on 3 May initiated the classic exchange between Wittgenstein and Turing on the possible harmfulness of a contradiction in a system, in which Turing claimed that it could lead to a bridge falling down (Diamond 1976, 211;

Monk 1991, 421). In a letter to Kaila the following day, 4 May, von Wright seems to be quite annoyed with Wittgenstein. “I am sure everything he says is excellent, but where does he want to go and will he ever arrive anywhere at all?”, he exclaims. On Tuesday 2 May, von Wright had also been present at a discussion evening at the house of G.E. Moore on the certainty of sense data. According to von Wright, Wittgenstein had “...said incredibly much, without really arriving to the point of the matter”. In the following weeks, von Wright also got his share of Wittgenstein’s sometimes quite arrogant comments to suggestions made by his class. At the meeting on 22 May, Wittgenstein started by drawing a distinction between two ways of using “corresponding to reality”, i.e. between saying that a reality corresponds to an experiential proposition and saying that a reality corresponds to words like “rain” or “red”. This led to the following exchange between Wittgenstein and von Wright:

von Wright: It doesn’t seem to me there is a very big difference between correspondence in the case of a sentence and correspondence in the case of a word.

Wittgenstein: There is an enormous difference.

From this, Wittgenstein went on to show that what he really had in mind was the difference between saying that a sentence is true and saying that it has a meaning. (Diamond 1976, 247).

Wittgenstein was also present when von Wright read his first paper ever at the *Moral Science Club* three days later, on 25 May 1939. Its title was “The justification of induction”, the topic of the thesis von Wright was working on during his stay. In a letter to Kaila the following day it becomes clear that von Wright wasn’t very pleased with the reception – “The discussion afterwards was quite bad, Wittgenstein had some suggestions, as usual”. Von Wright’s disappointment may have stemmed partly from the fact that he had *tried* to incorporate elements of Wittgenstein’s reasoning in his talk. For this is how it was concluded:

The inductive problem – as so many problems in philosophy – is like a mist, and to solve the problem is merely to make the mist disappear. – What I have said is not meant to be a proof for this, I have merely tried to point out a way; which – if followed – ought to contribute to a clarification of the ideas which we are apt to connect with this particular problem. (Von Wright 1939).

Still, in the same letter to Kaila, he returns to the difficulties he had had in understanding Wittgenstein’s lectures. “Unfortunately, *one* term is much too short to get into his way of thinking”, he writes.

During the next few days, however, there was another private meeting between Wittgenstein and von Wright, which changed von Wright's attitude to Wittgenstein – forever, it seems. For now, von Wright is suddenly very enthusiastic about Wittgenstein – to say the least. Thus, on 6 June he writes to Kaila about a “long and wonderful” discussion he has had with Wittgenstein concerning proof theory. “[I] think that many vital things have become clear to me”, he says, adding that he, however, has “difficulties in saying what”. He also approvingly quotes Wittgenstein's well-known analogy between mathematics and potatoes sprouting in a dark cellar (cf. BT 643), asking Kaila not to tell anyone about this finding, since Wittgenstein loathes the spreading of false doctrines in his name. “[I] would not like to be another Judas among those there already are”, he writes. But during the meeting, the discussion has also turned to architecture and music. In this connection Wittgenstein has shown his ability to whistle entire movements of works by Beethoven, Mozart and Bach, without missing a note. Von Wright describes the experience as “fantastic” and concludes his passage on Wittgenstein in the letter by saying:

Yes, he is a charming, wonderful person, a perfect nature-being and – a perfect Viennese. I don't believe there can be any doubt about that he is one of the most brilliant original minds of philosophy and to get to know him I look at as one of the most wonderful favours that has befallen me.

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What was behind the change in the young von Wright's attitude to Wittgenstein? It seems evident that he felt that he had been admitted to the “inner circle”, which may have been caused simply by the fact that Wittgenstein *now* was prepared also to discuss philosophy with him. But there is something else that may shed some light on the paradoxical side of von Wright's relationship to Wittgenstein. Subsequently never doubting that Wittgenstein was a philosophical genius, von Wright still was the person close to Wittgenstein who kept the greatest intellectual distance. For von Wright, Wittgenstein did not become a teacher whose methods he tediously strived to follow, but rather appeared as an example who, at most, could inspire him to do work in a similar *spirit* – like the way that even a strong influence by a great writer or artist does not necessarily find its outlet in simple epigonism. With this interpretation in mind von Wright's enthusiasm over Wittgenstein's whistling appear as more than just a youthful delight over an outstanding skill, as a vital part of a general impression of Wittgenstein's *greatness* that was forming in his mind. When von Wright tries to put words (in a letter to Wittgenstein 27 August 1939) to what Wittgenstein has given him in Cambridge, it is characteristically also *music* that enters as his metaphor: “.. what I got from your

lectures and my discussions with you during my time in Cambridge has given me a certain “tune” to follow into a realm of thoughts” (McGuinness 2008, letter 259).

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Georg Henrik von Wright to Eino Kaila 6 June 1939.

(All translations from the original Swedish are made by the author)

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